My Parting Prescription for America

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Dedication

To the thousands of people across America and the world who opened their hearts and shared their stories and insights with me. You helped me see more clearly and understand more deeply. This Prescription is a reflection of your wisdom. I hope it will help people everywhere live healthier, more fulfilled lives.

About this Surgeon General's Perspective

This Perspective is a reflection that weaves together Dr. Vivek Murthy's personal and professional experiences having spent a majority of the last ten years as our nation's Surgeon General. While there are citations provided in some portions of the document, this is not a traditional scientific report. Rather, it is an individual perspective on the root causes of widespread pain and unhappiness he has seen across America and a prescription for how we can cultivate health and fulfillment.

In this document, Dr. Murthy describes a number of concepts, including success, fulfillment, community, relationships, meaning, purpose, and more. While the exact definition of these terms may vary among different experts and disciplines, Dr. Murthy lays out his view of these concepts and how they can relate to our overall health.

Community as the Formula for Fulfillment

My father once told me that he never felt a sense of emptiness—that painful, gnawing sense that something is missing—until he left his village in India. It was a remarkable statement from a man who grew up with no running water or electricity, and whose family scarcely had enough money to put food on the table each night.

Yet what they lacked in wealth, they made up for in community. Families looked out for each other. If you went by someone's house, they invited you in to share whatever food they had. When my father lost his mother to tuberculosis when he was 10, the village stepped in to help my grandfather and his six children. Friends and extended family became surrogate parents.

Against all odds, and bolstered by the support of his village, my father went on to study medicine. Medical school lectures and hospital rotations never taught him about the power of community. But his patients did, first in India and then later in the United States. Through their lives, he quickly came to see that community was a potent source of health and well-being. He observed that you could eat well, exercise, sleep eight hours a night, and have all the right vital signs, lab tests, and imaging studies. **But without community, it was hard to feel whole.**

My parents were grateful for the chance to make America their home, yet they missed that sense of community so much that they made sure to teach my sister and me about its importance as we grew up. Every time they visited a friend who lost a loved one or brought over food when someone was sick, they demonstrated to us the value of showing up for others. By surrounding our family with friends who never needed us to say or do anything special, they taught us the power of being around people who allow you to be unabashedly yourself. And through their care for patients over the years—which involved everything from house calls to hospital visits to late-night phone conversations when someone fell ill—they reminded us that when we find our purpose in contributing to the lives of others, life isn't always easy, but it is immensely gratifying.

Over time, I came to appreciate that my parents weren't teaching me how to build community—they were giving me the formula for fulfillment and well-being.

Why? Because community is a powerful source of life satisfaction *and* life expectancy. It's where we know each other, help each other, and find purpose in contributing to each other's lives.

These core pillars of community—relationships, service, and purpose—are powerful drivers of fulfillment. They can also significantly influence health outcomes, including premature mortality, heart disease, depression, and anxiety.[1-14] Community also gives us strength and resilience when facing the big challenges and countless paper cuts that come with moving through the world.

We don't have to be fulfilled in every way by one single community. Most of us need a few different communities in our lives to make us feel whole. And

communities don't have to be static; they can evolve and overlap, like when parents from our child's school become part of our softball league or join our congregation.

Some of the most enduring lessons about community can be found in faith and cultural traditions across the world. The teachings of Christianity ask us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and the Hindu scriptures guide us to care for our guests as we would care for the Divine. The Jewish emphasis on Hesed, loving-kindness, is a reminder of our obligation to be there for and care for each other, and the Muslim pillar of Zakat enshrines the importance of lifting up others through charity. The South African philosophy of Ubuntu—often translated as "I am, because we are"—emphasizes our interdependence and responsibility to one another as human beings.

These are clear, consistent, and time-tested calls to cultivate community for our individual and collective well-being.

Our Challenge Today

As I've traveled across America over two terms as Surgeon General, I've discovered something deeply disturbing: **this sense of community has eroded for too many of us, with alarming consequences.**

In dispirited and disheartened tones, people have confided, "I don't have anyone to count on." They tell me that they feel they carry life's burdens alone—and it's exhausting. And they often ask why we treat each other so poorly as the distance seems to grow between the qualities so many of us deem important—kindness, generosity, respect—and the values we see on display in the world around us.

In different ways, people tell me they feel something is missing in their lives. For too many, this includes a gap in basic needs—food, housing, financial security, and others—which are all-too-common contributors to pain and distress. But even when these gaps are addressed, it can still feel like something is missing. I think often of the patient I cared for early in my medical career who won the lottery yet found himself feeling empty. He had money, plenty of it, but lacked a reason to get up each morning or people with whom he could share his life. I also think about the college and high school students I've met who question whether the constant hustle to chase fame, wealth, and power—the modern triad of success—is really what life is about.

Many of them ask the same question: what's the point of success if it doesn't bring fulfillment? Even worse, what if our current approach to success is hurting our health and moving us further away from fulfillment?

While the need for community might seem self-evident, the societal forces that have led to its erosion are long-standing, rapidly evolving, and bigger than a single individual.

Technology, despite all its benefits, has trapped many of us in digital silos with less face-to-face contact. The idea of approaching someone you don't know to strike up a conversation, calling a friend to say hello, or opening up about your struggles feels increasingly uncomfortable. Social media has turbocharged a culture of constant comparison that too often undermines our self-worth and makes us feel dissatisfied with our lives. The decline of civic institutions has made knowing where to go for community harder. And underneath these trends, the pendulum of self-reliance has swung so far to one end that needing others is seen as a sign of weakness, leading to a vicious cycle of stress, isolation, and more stress.

The messages that surround us in advertisements, articles, and our online feeds often urge us to fill the emptiness by optimizing ourselves—with more dollars, more likes, more achievement, more stuff—or by drowning ourselves in distraction and substances that can numb the pain.

Yet trying to fill our internal void with approval and accolades and addictive forces isn't helping. Neither are the voices that surround us seeking to profit from our division and despair by weaponizing our pain. These forces may bring short-lived relief. But it doesn't last, and it ultimately deepens the crisis of spirit we are

experiencing. It's like drinking sea water when you're thirsty: you're only left more parched.

Driven by the desire to understand more about what's missing and its consequences in people's lives, I spoke with thousands of people in communities across America and launched Surgeon General's initiatives on the addiction crisis, youth mental health, loneliness and isolation, workplace well-being, parental stress, and social media's impact on our youth.

With every conversation, I saw the stakes more clearly: the fracturing of community in America is driving a deeper spiritual crisis that threatens our fundamental well-being. It is fueling not only illness and despair on an individual level, but also pessimism and distrust across society which have all made it painfully difficult to rise together in response to common challenges.

Through my work over two terms as Surgeon General, I saw that the answer to "What's missing?" is simple, yet profound: community.

The loss of community has become one of the defining challenges of our time. In response, we need a fundamental shift in how we build and prioritize community.

Building Community

So, what makes community possible? Three core elements: relationships, service, and purpose. And one core virtue: love. Together, they create the ecosystem of meaning and belonging that are essential for fulfillment.

Relationships, service, and purpose are the time-tested triad of fulfillment that stands in contrast to wealth, fame, and power which define the modern-day triad of success. There is nothing inherently wrong with pursuing wealth, fame, and power; the challenge is when we assume these elements are the key to fulfillment and then proceed to build a society that makes these the litmus test for an individual's inherent worth and value. The triad of success is focused on the individual. The triad of fulfillment connects us with something bigger than the individual. The triad of success may earn us praise and possessions. The triad of fulfillment gives us meaning and belonging.

Relationships are the connections we build with friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, and others we encounter. Healthy relationships, where we feel seen and where we can be ourselves, can be a powerful source of joy and support and can be buffers to stress. They can improve our performance at work and school and help us make sense of the world as we process our lives with one another.

When we lack meaningful relationships, we can experience loneliness.[5,15-17] Currently, around a third of adults and half of young people experience loneliness.[18,19] Being socially disconnected increases our risk of heart disease, dementia, depression, anxiety, and premature death.[1,2,5-7,11,16,20]

In modern times, I have observed that loneliness has been exacerbated by multiple factors. We move around much more, which often means we leave our communities behind. Participation in many of the civic organizations that used to bring us together—recreational leagues, service organizations, neighborhood associations, and faith institutions—has declined. Parents are spending more time both at work and with childcare compared to a few decades ago which often leaves less time for social interaction. Social media has also fundamentally changed our in-person interactions—friends have been replaced with followers and confidantes with contacts, with profound consequences for the depth and quality of our relationships.

One consequence of this shift has been a diminishing of our ability to have generous, open dialogue. Outrage now drives online conversations and much of the news we encounter, fueled by an outrage industrial complex that profits from maximizing engagement despite the human cost. Ultimately, it's hard to connect with each other when we can't talk to each other.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated our loneliness, separating us literally and figuratively, and leaving many of us feeling more vulnerable and alone.

Building our relationships with one another requires the commitment to make social connection a priority and the courage to be vulnerable and real with each other. It requires expanding our circle of concern

to people who may differ in background and beliefs but who are still part of our community—our neighbors, our coworkers and classmates, the families at our local schools, members of our local faith groups, and the many people in our neighborhoods whose lives and work touch our own.

We can start by reaching out to people we care about each day and prioritizing time for regular connection even if it is brief. We can create technology-free zones in our lives to focus our attention when we are with others, enhancing the quality of our interactions. We can design workplace cultures and practices that foster social connection. We can invest in building social infrastructure—the programs, policies, and physical elements like libraries and community spaces that allow people to come together and form social connections in their neighborhoods. And we can do more in schools to help kids develop skills for building healthy relationships and dialogue. We can't take it for granted that everyone is born with the skills to foster and maintain friendships—they need to be cultivated with intention and care from the earliest of ages.

Service constitutes the actions we take that benefit others. This can be regular volunteering for a community organization or school program or participation in National Service Programs. But service can also be small acts of kindness toward someone we know or a stranger.

Even though service is defined as benefiting others, it can have profound benefits to the person rendering the service. Studies on older adults show that sustained service efforts can reduce the risk of hypertension, stroke, early death, and depression.[3,8,9,14] They can also improve cognitive functioning and keep us more connected to others.[21,22] Service can help build

the skills, character, and dispositions to be effective in the workplace and in civic life. At a time when so many people feel like they don't matter, service also reminds us we have value we bring to the world.

But participation in formal volunteering has remained low, never rising above 30% since the government started collecting data in 2002.[23] Rates of informal service—like helping neighbors with house-sitting or lending tools—hover around only 50%.[24]

We have an opportunity to revitalize our culture and practice of service. We can commit to one act of kindness each day such as dropping off food to a friend who is overwhelmed, checking on a work colleague who is having a difficult day, or welcoming a new neighbor to the community, to name a few. We can create opportunities in our schools and workplaces to make service something we do together and part of our learning and work cultures. We can invest in state and national service programs for younger and older generations to serve communities across America, drawing from new examples like the American Climate Corps and the Youth Mental Health Corps as well as older examples like AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, and the U.S. military. We can even make these kinds of service programs universal expectations so we all have the opportunity at some point in our lives to serve a community side-by-side with our fellow Americans.

Purpose is the feeling of having an overarching life aim that guides and prioritizes our decisions and actions.[25,26] It's not "what" we do. It's "why" we do it. It's not our goals or achievements, but our reasons for them. Having a strong sense of purpose helps prioritize our decisions about how we spend our time, energy,

and resources and how we think about our short-term goals.[25,26] We may find our purpose in raising a child, helping feed children in a school cafeteria, caring for our neighbors, being a good friend, volunteering for a cause, or improving the lives of others through your job.

When people have a strong sense of individual purpose anchored in improving other's lives, we invest more in one another and are more committed to each other; this, in turn, strengthens community.

Purpose can be good for our physical and mental health. A high sense of individual purpose may reduce the risk of early death as well as stroke, lung disease, and dementia for some.[4,10,27] Research also shows that people with a strong sense of purpose may experience lower levels of depression and anxiety and greater resilience in the face of stress.[13,28]

To live a life of purpose should not be the privilege of a few, but an opportunity for all that we help each other nurture. It's why building the skills and tools to cultivate purpose is essential and should be a part of how we teach and support children as they grow in schools, families, and communities. That is why lifting up stories of purpose in our culture through music, movies, books, sermons, media, and more is so important—it helps people see purpose that's rooted in contributing to others as inspiring, fulfilling, and the norm.

Right now, many people don't have a clear sense of purpose. In one recent study from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, 58% of 18- to 25-years-olds said they have low, or no sense of purpose or meaning in life.[29] We must change this.

The Core Virtue of Community: Love

When it comes to community, *how* we approach our relationships, service, and purpose matters. Over half a century ago, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us that we cannot build a healthy community if we are motivated by hatred toward others.

To build community requires love. Love not as sentimentality, but as a commanding force with the power to build, strengthen, and heal. Love as generosity and kindness. Love as hope and grace. Love as courage.

The love required to build community must not be reserved only for close family and friends or those who share our beliefs and life experiences; it must also be extended to neighbors, colleagues, people of different backgrounds, people with whom we disagree, and even people we consider our opponents. It requires recognizing something deeper and more fundamental that connects us.

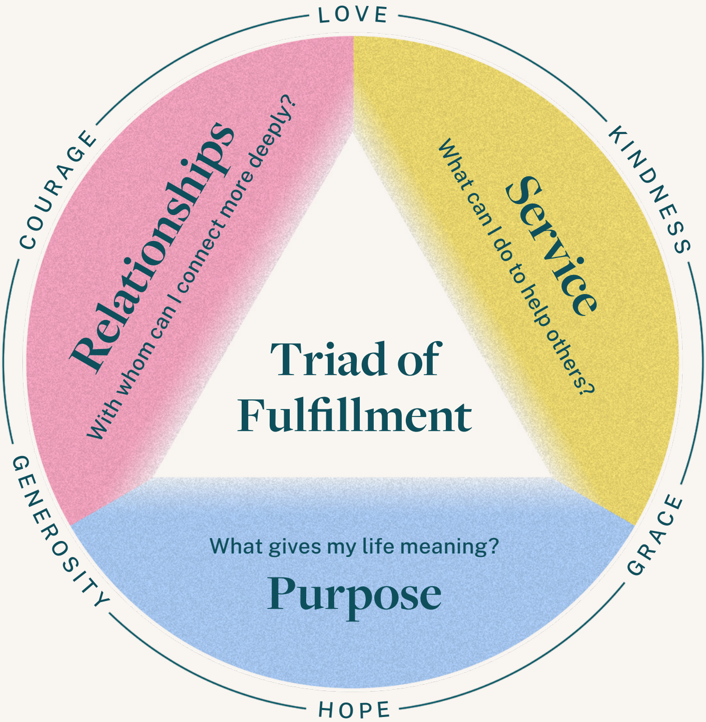
Communities that are built around fear and animosity may mobilize people to take action on a particular issue or provide a sense of affiliation and support through shared grievance, but they ultimately have a corrosive effect. They deepen our division, turning us against one another. And the persistent experience of fear and anger ultimately drains and hurts us.

By contrast, history tells us consistently of the power of love. Love helped sustain and guide Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, and other leaders in the 1960s through their long struggle against injustice as they fought for civil rights. Love enabled Nelson Mandela to foster reconciliation in South Africa following a bitter fight for freedom. Love fueled Mother Teresa who observed that "the most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved," and who instead urged us to build community with small acts of great love. And today, as it has been for generations, it is love that inspires parents to put everything on the line for their children, compels neighbors to help each other during moments of hardship, and guides soldiers to put themselves in harm's way to defend not only the country they love but also their brothers and sisters in arms.

Sometimes we may be tempted to view love as soft and a source of weakness. Nothing could be further from the truth. The sacrifices and strength that love enables are the foundation on which we build our lives. We are at our best not when we fear but when we love, not when we turn away but when we turn toward one another. This must be our compass as we set out to build community. Leading with love means seeing love as a virtue to cultivate in ourselves, to encourage in our families, to infuse in our workplaces, schools, and halls of government, to insist on in our leaders, and to shape our public conversation. A community grounded in love is a community that will stand.

The Triad of Fulfillment

*The core elements of **community**—relationships, service, and purpose—also define the triad of fulfillment. When combined with the core virtue of love, they create an ecosystem for meaning and belonging.*



The Momentum for Community is Building

The good news is the essential work of creating community is already underway in homes and communities across America. And while we must accelerate this work and bring it together into a clear movement, the fact it is happening shows us it is possible.

In Baltimore, Maryland, the organization Thread identifies 9th grade students who are at risk for failing to graduate and surrounds them with an extended family of up to four adult volunteers. This chosen family does whatever it takes to provide their student with support, including tutoring, giving rides, packing lunches, connecting to community resources, and providing emotional support. As Sarah Hemminger, the founder of Thread told me, the secret to Thread is that they keep showing up for their students. They never give up on them. Thread recognizes the inherent dignity of every individual and is helping thousands of people—students and volunteers—build relationships, service, and purpose in their lives. It has also led to a dramatic increase in graduation rates and is helping kids realize their full potential.

Starting in Marin County, California and now spreading to 10,000 schools across America, the Beyond Differences program is empowering students to help their

peers address loneliness and isolation. Volunteers reach out to classmates who are having a difficult time and bring them together for meals, projects, recreation, and conversation. The program has given tens of thousands of student volunteers a sense of purpose as they have helped build a culture of belonging for millions of their peers. The friendships they have built with each other in the process have also enriched their lives, demonstrating that when we extend help to others, we benefit as well.

Community is also being built on an individual level. A woman I met on my travels shared with me how the recent loss of her husband plunged her into a period of loneliness and isolation. Without him, she was no longer getting together with other couples as they used to do every week, and she no longer felt she could work on the book project they had undertaken together. But over the two years that followed, she moved from their suburban home into an urban condo building where she found herself part of a community of neighbors who helped each other out. She found a small group of girlfriends, two of whom had lost their husbands recently, and they began meeting regularly for dinner to share honestly about their lives. And she decided to pick up the book project again, which gave her something to be excited about each day and a way to contribute to the world that she found deeply meaningful.

Another woman I met, Sarah, moved to Dallas some years ago and found herself searching for community. She decided to start by inviting her new neighbors over for a potluck even though she wasn't sure if anyone would come. It turned out that 91 neighbors showed up, many of them hungry for social connection themselves. Over time, neighbors began enjoying each other's company and looking out for each other more as they went from being

strangers to friends. Sarah now helps other people create their own "Neighbor's Table," where they can gather neighbors to build the community so many of us crave.

We also have examples from history. At the start of the 20th century, America was experiencing many of the same concerning trends we see today in social disconnection, polarization, and pessimism. It was a movement to rebuild community, as described by Professor Robert Putnam in his powerful book *Upswing*, that helped drive a 60-year turnaround toward greater cohesion, prosperity, and satisfaction.

There are many ways we can cultivate community in our lives starting right now. As individuals, we can build a practice of taking one action each day to help someone. We can join or start a service program in our community or be a part of a faith community. We can commit to gathering with friends and neighbors on a regular basis over food, music, walks, books, sports, faith, and other shared interests; and we can be proactive about using these opportunities to learn about each other's stories. We can be more intentional about having conversation with peers and our children about how we cultivate purpose that is rooted in contributing to the lives of others. These actions may seem small, but they are powerful acts of community that can build trust, create belonging, and renew our faith in each other.

The work of building community requires leaders in government, business, and civil society to step up as well. We can strengthen national service programs and support local initiatives that bring people together to build relationships and help their community. Workplaces can create opportunities for people to engage in service together and to learn about each other's stories. We can make cultivating purpose an explicit focus as we teach

children and as we reflect throughout our lives. Both employers and educational institutions can help shift the pendulum back toward the triad of fulfillment by building a focus on service, purpose, and relationships into their recruitment criteria, metrics, curricula, and organizational culture. This can strengthen not only individual well-being but also organizational engagement and contributions. And we can use the platforms we have—however big or small they may be—to shape culture around prioritizing community and supporting the virtues of love, generosity, kindness, and courage that it requires.

In our own ways, we all have the power to choose community.

Each time we do, we are doing our part to pave the road to fulfillment for ourselves and others.

Closing

When the news came that our first child was on the way, I remember the exhilaration I felt at the prospect of becoming a father. I also remember the deep sense of worry I felt about the world our little boy would be inheriting—a world that felt overwhelmed with suffering, conflict, and unhappiness. I didn't fully realize it then, but I was joining the legions of parents raising their kids in an uncertain and sometimes dangerous world who were all asking the same question: how do I make the world better for my children?

What I want for my children more than anything is for them to be healthy, happy, and fulfilled. I now know that community is the key to securing this hope. It will provide them with meaning and belonging. It will allow them to give and receive the love and support we all require. It will be the source of strength and solidarity they will need to protect what is good about the world and repair what needs fixing. Community will always help them find their way home.

Today, we are faced with a profound choice. Do we continue with the status quo, marked by pain, disconnection, and division? Or do we choose a different path—one of joy, health, and fulfillment where we turn toward each other instead of away from each other, where we choose love over fear, where we recognize community as the irreplaceable foundation for our well-being?

As I finish my tenure as Surgeon General, this is my parting prescription, my final wish for all of us: Choose community.

It won't always be easy. It will require rethinking and, in some cases, rejecting the conventional wisdom that tells us what defines success and a good life. It will involve making the hard but necessary choice to shift our focus from fame, wealth, and power to the time-tested triad of fulfillment that is grounded in service, purpose, and relationships.

And it will demand we grapple with fundamental questions: What is our responsibility to one another? How do we create a culture that prioritizes community and the virtues it requires? What kind of world do we seek to create together, for ourselves and for our children? Creating community requires an explicit commitment to be a part of each other's lives and to make those lives better. This commitment is the foundation for a new social contract we are now called to build together.

Like most people, I sometimes find myself worried about whether I'm achieving enough, getting enough recognition, or making enough money. In those moments, I think about the patients I cared for at the end of their lives and what they shared with me about what made for a fulfilling life. It was never the size of their bank accounts, the number of their followers, or their list of achievements. It was always about people. The people they loved. The people they served. The people whose lives they touched. In the end, when only the most meaningful strands of life remain, this is what matters.

America and the world need a new generation of community builders. A generation defined not by age but by spirit—by a fierce, unyielding commitment to each other and a clear-eyed, full-hearted recognition that we are kin, not enemies and that we fundamentally need each other. We must be that generation. It is up to us to reject the pessimism and animosity of our time and

instead choose courage and hope. The choice we make to build community has the power to change lives and transform society.

Let us never forget that good people with hearts full of love can change the world.

With gratitude, hope, and love,



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“There is an old African proverb, ‘When you pray, move your feet.’ As a nation if we care for the Beloved Community, we must move our feet, our hands, our hearts, our resources to build and not to tear down, to reconcile and not to divide, to love and not to hate, to heal and not to kill. In the final analysis, we are one people, one family, one house—the American house, the American family.”

John Lewis, *Civil Rights Leader & U.S. Congressman*

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